

Kids in dangerous schools must be helped

GOOD NEWS FOR parents with children enrolled in Colorado's public schools: There is not one persistently dangerous school in the state. At least, that is what the Colorado Department of Education wants you to believe.

Under the recently enacted No Child Left Behind legislation, each state is instructed to determine its own definition of a "persistently dangerous school." This law protects children attending such a school by allowing them to move to a safer one within the same district. As President Bush explains, sending a child to a dangerous school "is the ultimate betrayal of adult responsibility."

Astonishingly, the standards recently created by the Colorado Department of Education for a dangerous school only require administrators to report the most serious incidents, labeled crimes of violence. These include first- and second-degree assault, sexual assault, arson, murder and aggravated robbery. Furthermore, the number of incidents allotted per year by the new standards is so numerous, not even several dozen murders in one school would meet the benchmark.

For instance, a school of 600-899 students is allowed 135 crimes of violence a year, for two straight years. In addition, it would take 225 violent crimes a year, for two years in a row, for a school with 1,200 students to be listed as persistently dangerous.

In Colorado, a fight is no longer a fight, just simply an "incident." Unless an individual receives serious bodily injuries, it is allowed to go unreported to law enforcement and local parents under the new Colorado Department of Education standards.

Colorado parents have been able to enroll their children in the school of their choice



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since the passage of the Public Schools of Choice Act in 1990. However, the recently created definition of "persistently dangerous" by the education department saves public schools from the embarrassment of being labeled and a potential exodus of kids that could come as a result of parents choosing to protect their children.

On Sept. 29, Rep. Tom Osborne, R-Neb., and I convened a congressional field hearing in Denver to investigate the standards used to define "persistently dangerous schools."

Through the testimony of a school safety expert, an affected parent, education department representatives and Colorado elected officials, we learned of the dangers some kids face when education officials fail to fully disclose a school's security problems.

In particular, the written testimony submitted by a Denver-area parent was the most revealing. Although her 12-year-old son was beaten up by a known gang member and needed to take a week off of school due to injuries, the school responded by filing charges with a local juvenile court against the 12-year-old's mother for the missed class time.

Shortly after that incident, her daughter was violently attacked by students from the

same middle school. Since it occurred three days before summer break, the school officials were not eager to address the problem.

This woman's experience is just one example of many in the state where children spend their days in dangerous environments, parents have little recourse, and some school officials would rather protect their image than face difficult solutions to critical dangers.

As a result of the findings in this hearing, I am leading the congressional effort to help state education departments accurately define "persistently dangerous." I am urging Education Secretary Rod Paige to give states greater clarification of the original intent of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Furthermore, the president of Colorado's Senate, John Andrews, indicated after the hearing that he plans to introduce legislation to better inform parents and protect children by replacing the Colorado Department of Education's definition with an accurate benchmark that identifies a school as dangerous.

Parents are the best advocates for their children. Empowering parents by insisting on accurate information about their child's daily surroundings is critical to successful learning.

Fights and other dangerous incidents impede these instances of learning. The current standards and reporting lack the necessary accountability for local parents to protect their children and they need to be quickly revised.

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